



SCHEHERAZADE

OR

THE FUTURE OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL

## TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

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of this Book*

# SCHEHERAZADE

OR

THE FUTURE OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL

BY

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Now the Vizier had two daughters ;, the elder of whom was named Scheherazade ; and the younger, Duniyazade The former had read various books of histories, and the lives of preceding kings, and stories of past generations : it is asserted that she had collected together a thousand books of histories, relating to preceding generations and kings, and works of the poets. . .

Her father, the Vizier, then took her to the King, who, when he saw him, was rejoiced, and said, Hast thou brought me what I desired ? He answered, Yes When the King, therefore, introduced himself to her, she wept ; and he said to her, What aileth thee ? She answered, O King, I have a young sister, and I wish to take leave of her So the King sent to her ; and she came to her sister, and embraced her, and sat near the foot of the bed ; and after she had waited for a proper opportunity, she said, By Allah ! O my sister, relate to us a story to beguile the waking hour of our night. Most willingly, answered Scheherazade, if this virtuous King permit me And the King, hearing these words, and being restless, was pleased with the idea of listening to the story ; and thus, on the first night of the thousand and one, Scheherazade commenced her recitations.

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§ 1

To forecast the future of any art is a chancy undertaking at best. A new writer, a new painter, a new musician appears unheralded and, tiresome creature that he is, goes and does the very thing that critics have declared he shouldn't, or couldn't. Happily, the critics do not always live to see it. Dr Johnson, for example, did not live to see the appearance of *The Lyrical Ballads*, less than twenty years after his declaration concerning Pope :

New sentiments and new images others may produce ; but to attempt any further improvements of versification will be dangerous. Art and diligence have now

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done their best, and what shall be added will be the effort of tedious toil and needless curiosity.

Perhaps it was just as well; for he would have been sadly put out, not only by the new sentiments and new images, but also by the further improvements in versification that Coleridge at least inaugurated. We all know, too, how annoyed the critics were by Keats and Flaubert, Cézanne and Wagner and Debussy; and over Mr Joyce and Mr Epstein and the Sitwells controversy still rages. In any attempt to predict the English novel of to-morrow, we do well to be cautious.

But not, surely, to be over-cautious. There are professors and belle-lettrists of no little retrospective acumen who meet all inquiries about the future with mystery-mongering of the crudest kind. (*The London Mercury* is their favourite journal.) Genius, they say, is quite unpredictable: be content with what is past and present; don't trouble yourself with what is to come—till it comes.

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But that is only fear of being afterwards proved wrong, one of the commonest academic vices ; and *genius* is a word employed chiefly to conceal our ignorance and to beg three-fourths of our questions. The development of an art is not wholly erratic and haphazard, and the future, if only we can discern it, lies already in the present. Why not look for it ? Why not, in order to make a guess at the probable course of English fiction in the next quarter of a century, scrutinize the English fiction of to-day in the hope of distinguishing its growing points from its dead ends ? What does it matter if some of the growing points unaccountably wither, and a few of the seeming dead ends unaccountably revive ?

### § 2

And first let us clear out of the way the notion that English fiction to-day



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is composed entirely of dead ends. This notion is not so rare as we might think. It appears to have been held, for instance, by an anonymous writer in *The New Statesman* for 5th March, 1927, who concluded an enthusiastic and on the whole discriminating review of the English translation of *Jew Süss* with the following remarkable sentence :

However, it is difficult to find serious fault with a publisher who in the desert of our own post-war literature brings us a book like this.

*Desert!* Was ever word more inappropriately chosen in the haste of rounding off a column? *Jungle, thicket, flood, spate, swamp, morass*—if you like. Any of these words, though perhaps a little strong, would not have been wholly unsuitable. But *desert*? Surely not. Our post-war literature, and especially its fiction, may be rank, undisciplined, luxurious, and sometimes extravagant, but heaven knows there is plenty of it, and of what there is

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very little can be justly described as parched or barren.

As against this anonymous reviewer so magnanimous as not to find serious fault with Mr Martin Secker, let me quote M. Abel Chevalley, who, being French, is not likely to suffer from national bias in our favour.

• *Les pages qui précèdent auraient été écrites en vain si l'impression n'en restait que le roman britannique est l'un des genres les plus vivants, les plus vivaces, dans la littérature du monde entier. Je n'ai point caché sa principale faiblesse : défaut général de composition et de concentration ; surabondance, suractivité, surproduction. Mais cette sorte de faiblesse n'est pas à la portée de tous. C'est la pauvreté de l'opulence, la rançon de la liberté. Quels trésors d'observation, quelle richesse de sujets, de types, de procédés, quelle fidélité quasi-photo-graphique dans la plupart de ces oeuvres, mêmes les moins bonnes ; quels trésors de vie elles recèlent et révèlent ; combien étriquée paraît dans son ensemble la production romanesque des autres littératures ;*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Le roman anglais de notre temps' (1921), p. 245.

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Superabundance, superactivity, super-production—if these words were applicable in 1921, are they not equally so to-day ?

The average number of novels published each year since 1918 in England and the United States may be, and I believe is, rather less than the average for the years between 1900 and 1914. That is neither here nor there. What is important is that far more of those being published each year are good, and far less, unmitigated rubbish ; and moreover, that the average level of the good is steadily rising. The number of men and women of high talent whose best work is being cast into the novel form is very great ; as witness Walter de la Mare, Norman Douglas, E. M. Forster, David Garnett, Stephen Hudson, Aldous Huxley, C. E. Montague, R. H. Mottram, Liam O'Flaherty, and T. F. Powys ; - Stella Benson, Rose Macaulay, May Sinclair, Rebecca West, and Virginia Woolf ; Sherwood Anderson, James Branch Cabell, Willa Cather,

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E. E. Cummings, John dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, and Edith Wharton ; and young writers not yet established like H. E. Bates, Margaret Kennedy, Pauline Smith, Ruth Suckow, and Silvia Townsend Warner.<sup>1</sup> From all these we have learned to expect a higher level of competence in their craft than from similar writers in the first ten years of the century. And we get it. Which of them, except possibly Mr Sinclair Lewis, would dare to write now in the slovenly manner of Mr Wells and Mr Bennett at their worst ? Which, except occasionally Mr Montague and Mr Cabell, would dare to be so slick and vapid as Mr Galsworthy when he wrote *The White Monkey* and *The Silver Spoon* ?

Yet there is something to be said for our anonymous reviewer's opinion, all the same. Our post-war novelists do not make a desert, ~~but~~ the mischief is

<sup>1</sup> I have deliberately omitted from this list all authors whose reputation was made before the war

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that none of them make a masterpiece either. Ever and again one of their books seems to miss being a masterpiece by only the breadth of a thumbnail. Think of Mr Joyce's *Ulysses*, some of Mr Lawrence's long-short stories, Mr Douglas's *South Wind*, Mr Huxley's *Uncle Spencer* (also a long-short), and Mrs Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Reading any of these books for the first time, we may well grow excited and cry out that this at last is what we have looked for and hoped for, that this at last is the real thing. But alas ! it never has been. When the book has been read and laid aside for a month or two, we know in our hearts that we have suffered disappointment again, that the indubitable masterpiece of English post-war fiction is still to write. These novels are good, some of them very good, others, like *Ulysses*, diabolically influential ; but not one of them has been quite good enough to take its place in the canon along with *The Egoist*, *The Return of the Native*,

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*Lord Jim*, *Maurice Guest*, *Tonobungay*, *The Old Wives' Tale*, and the first three parts of *The Forsyte Saga*.

Why is it ? Why have none of these writers, most of whom have technical ability equal if not superior to that of Joseph Conrad, Mr Hardy, and Mr Wells, and all of whose worst books are better than the worst of Joseph Conrad, Mr Hardy, and Mr Wells, yet been able to surpass the late Victorians and the Edwardians at their best ?

It is not enough to answer : ' All a question of genius in the authors '. That tells us nothing, and, besides, it doesn't happen to be true. In genius (whatever that may mean exactly) Mr Joyce is not inferior to Conrad, nor Mr Lawrence to Mr Bennett, nor Mrs Woolf to Mr Galsworthy.

Nor is it enough (though certainly a better answer) to say that the best contemporary writers, whether in prose or in verse, are more speculative and experimental than their predecessors at the beginning of the century, more

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suspicious of literary traditions, more eager to try out new forms, more exacting in their standards of success. All that is true enough. The growing points in contemporary literature are to be found : in poetry in the work of Dr Robert Bridges ( the most astounding of laureates), ' H.D ', Mr Robert Graves, Mr T. S. Eliot, Mr Richard Aldington and Miss Edith Sitwell, rather than in the work of Mr W. H. Davies, Mr Edmund Blunden, Mr J. C. Squire, and Mr Edward Shanks ; and in prose fiction in the work of Mrs Woolf, rather than in that of Mr Hugh Walpole. The future undoubtedly lies with those who are to-day dissatisfied and experimental, and who, just for that reason, cannot produce for us work that is itself satisfying. Again and again in literary history the same process may be seen at work : first, experimentation by writers who seem to later generations to have been of the second rank, but who might easily have appeared in the first rank had they not been forced to

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dissipate their energies on problems of method ; then the writers of indubitable first rank who take over the established forms as they stand, and write masterpieces therein ; then the hosts of mediocre writers who also accept the forms without question, and wear them threadbare ; and then—well, then the process begins all over again. Consider the rise, glory and decline of Elizabethan drama from *Gorbuduc* to Middleton's *Anything for a Quiet Life*, of Restoration comedy from Shadwell to Cibber, of Russian prose fiction from Gogol to Gorky. And so it is with the English novel of to-day. The established forms dating from last century are stereotyped and rather badly worn, and they no longer satisfy the writers who count ; but the new forms are still unsettled, still matters for discussion and controversy and trying out. Our fiction (like our poetry) is unmistakably transitional.

This, however, is only to push the question farther back. What is it



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transitional from ? What is it transitional to ? Why should our post-war novelists in England and America, especially in England, be dissatisfied and experimental ? — The complete answers to these questions cannot be given in a paragraph. Indeed, to make them really complete, we should have to undertake a far more searching analysis of contemporary life and the literary history of the last fifty years in Europe and America than is possible within an essay of this kind. But this is plain : genius apart, the reasons why English and American post-war fiction falls short of the highest standards are to be found, partly in the spiritual condition of post-war England and America and partly in the oddly confusing literary and scientific influences that have been brought to bear on post-war novelists. Let us summarily consider these in turn. 1

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### § 3

We have got so used to the cliché that the age we live in is one of disillusionment, cynicism, agnosticism, and the like—a characteristically jazz age, in fact—that we are liable either to accept it without troubling to think of its implications, or to deny it outright from sheer cussedness. When we grow desperately weary, as all of us do from time to time, of jazz and modernism, sex and anthropology, the poems of Mr Eliot and the savagery of Mr Wyndham Lewis, we tend to comfort ourselves with the thought that the bulk of our people are untouched by all this clamour, bustle and absurdity, that it is only a small part of the nation, a few hundreds perhaps in London, shouting across the Atlantic to a few hundreds in New York, who are vocal and ridiculous in their disenchantment.

‘ We emancipated people have got into

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the habit of thinking we're the world,' says Michael Mont to Fleur in *The White Monkey*; 'well! we aren't; we're an excrescence, small, and noisy. We talk as if all the old values and prejudices had gone; but they've no more gone, really, you know, than the rows of villas and little grey houses . . . I'm a bit fed up with the attitude of our crowd. If emancipation were true, one could stick it; but it's not. There isn't ten per cent difference between now and thirty years ago . . . Our lot think they're the tablecloth, but they're only the fringe.'

And most of us fall into Michael's state of mind now and then. Human nature, we say, doesn't change from generation to generation; or, if it does, the change is so gradual that we needn't take account of it. Human nature is much the same now as it was ten, fifteen, twenty thousand years ago, when Crô-Magnon magicians covered the roofs of their caves with paintings of the bison and wild boar. How foolish, then, to make-believe that we to-day are vastly different from our

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fathers' and grandfathers in the nineteenth century !

Human nature does not change. No, but human nurture does, and very rapidly ; and it is with nurture we have chiefly to deal. Nature alone will not take us far ; in a pure state it does not long outlast the cradle. Literary critics are given to talking a great deal of nonsense about it. They say, for example, that art, and especially poetry, the drama, and fiction, must concern itself with ' the elements of human nature ' and not with the accidents of a particular age and civilization. As if art could ! Why, no one yet knows what the elements of human nature are ; how many of them there are , what their relationships may be *inter se* ; and how far they grow, atrophy or combine under the pressure of experience. The psychologists are still vigorously disputing whether they ought to be termed instincts, emotions, dispositions, G factors, S factors, or what not, and, until this dispute is settled, no one else

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need bother his head very deeply about it. Whatever the elements of human nature turn out to be in the end, they can never concern the artist directly ; for they will always remain general, vague, and abstract, convenient tools for thought, but never more than implicit in the concrete realization that the artist seeks to achieve. And that concrete realization, let us make no mistake about it, needs must be given in terms of nurture, that is to say, in terms of some particular age and civilization.

Now, though it is sometimes a relief to sentimentalists like Mr Galsworthy, and Mr Stanley Baldwin, and President Coolidge, to pretend that our present age is not very different from those that have preceded it, that all appearances to the contrary are due to our focussing on a trivial minority of vocal and conspicuous people in London and Vienna, Paris and New York, and that therefore the social and political formulas of yesterday will still serve with little

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modification for to-day, this relief is purchased at the sacrifice of truth. Jazz is universal. Disillusionment does not lie merely on the surface of our civilization, it has eaten right through. Michael Mont's crowd may be only a fringe, and rather a ragged one at that ; but the tablecloth itself is moth-eaten and ready to split into holes at a touch. The warp of every civilization is its convictions, and the warp of ours has got worn out rather suddenly in many vital places.

Consider religion. Thirty years ago, most of the leading minds in Europe and America were agnostic, and freely admitted it ; now, about two-thirds of these nations are agnostic, whether they freely admit it or not.<sup>1</sup> And the

<sup>1</sup> It is said that 100,000 churches in the United States had to close down last year, and, as I write, there comes into my hand the report of an address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland by the Lord High Commissioner, in which address he is said to have called attention to 'the appalling fact' that much more than one-third of the population belongs to no church at all.

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remaining third is going Catholic or Fundamentalist, the violence of this reaction being as significant a mark of the essentially irreligious character of our age as any we could look for.

Consider morals and manners. Few of us (perhaps none) pick up and lay down a sexual relationship with the casualness of characters in Mr D. H. Lawrence's or Mr Aldous Huxley's novels. But whoever imagines that sexual conventions are as strong in the majority of people to-day as they were in 1900, deceives himself. Virtually all of us are ready to question one or more (usually more) of the sexual conventions of the nineteenth century, even when from timidity or the wish for a quiet life we are reluctant to carry out experiments on our own private account. The enfranchisement of women has made that inevitable. Nor has the interest in so-called sex novels all been worked up by catch-penny novelists, as some of the parsons would make out, or provoked by fanat-

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ical psycho-analysts with a kink in the brain; the readers themselves demand that a great deal of sexual experimentation shall be carried on for them vicariously in the pages of books.<sup>1</sup> As with sex, so with dress, smoking, dancing, alcohol, and the like: standards and conventions are not much more certain in a Perthshire village than in Chelsea or St John's Wood. And again the violent reactions are fully as significant—Prohibition, Anti-cigarette Leagues, and Boston and New York Societies for the Suppression of Good Literature and Similar Vices.

Consider politics. How many in England except Members of Parliament and their political agents now believe very seriously in the House of Commons? Lord Grey of Fallodon may continue to proclaim his faith in democratic representative government; most of

<sup>1</sup> The same thing happened, though necessarily on a smaller scale, affecting fewer people, in the years 1660-1700. See Mr Bonamy Dobree's admirable book on Restoration Comedy.



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us respect him for sincerity but decline to share his faith. As for Washington and the American Constitution, they have become two of the world's best standing jokes. Politics in the narrow sense no longer attracts more than third-rate intellects, since nearly everybody has found it out for the sometimes degrading and generally silly game that it is. Hence again the violent reactions in Communism, Fascism, industrial action, and so forth. When England and America cannot contrive to put any better brains than Mr Baldwin's and President Coolidge's into No. 10 Downing St. and the White House, is it surprising that most of us should either become contemptuously indifferent or take to preaching revolution, red or black ?

Our age, then, is riddled with disbelief. Though few of us are disillusioned and agnostic about everything, all of us are disillusioned and agnostic about some things, and most, about a good many. And who can wonder ?

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The process began long before the war ; it was already noteworthy enough in the later nineteenth century to be given a label, *fin de siècle*. But the war, and even more the peace, rapidly accelerated it. Had it not been for the war, we might still be reasonably certain that the man in the street believed in quite a number of things ; as matters stand now, the only one we can be certain that he does believe in is the money in his pocket. And why, when all is said, should he believe in anything less tangible ? He has seen a few million lives tossed away for no reason that he or anyone else has yet been able to discover ; he has met millionaire shipowners, and officers engaged on war propaganda, and fighting parsons, and bellicose base-commandants, and has seen all of them wearing the Order of the British Empire or some other decoration more expensive to procure ; and, oddest experience of all, he has read or listened to the speeches of Mr Lloyd

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George and been able to compare promise with performance. What illusions could we expect him to have left? What comment on the world could we expect from him save: 'The whole damned show is a blind and uncontrollable machine grinding men into dust. Why bother?'

Clearly, such a state of things cannot last indefinitely. If it did, our civilization would crumble to bits and disappear. And indeed, there are already signs, for those who are willing to see them, that it is passing. Most of the old convictions are gone beyond recovery, but their place is being slowly taken by new ones, which some people who belong essentially to Victorian times mistakenly acclaim as just the old convictions happily revived.<sup>1</sup>

### § 4

How does all this affect literature, and more particularly the novel, our

<sup>1</sup> See below, § 7.

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immediate concern?—In three ways: in content, form, and spiritual quality.

The effect on content is obvious enough. The novels of to-day directly mirror the conditions of religious, moral and political instability in which we all perforce live. Hence their freedom of incident and speech. Almost any incident may now be related, almost anything may now be said—and only printers' readers correcting proofs appear to be much upset about it. Do such incidents happen, are such naughty-naughty words used in life? If so, print them! That seems to be the only rule we are now bound by.

A manifest gain, this. A gain in sincerity and frankness, virtues always to be prized. But not an unmixed gain, since it has made possible the publication of novels of the Naughty-Sentimental kind, like Mr Michael Arlen's and Mr Alec Waugh's, and of the Brutal-Sentimental kind, like Mr T. F. Powys's. Both kinds are negligible

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in the history of literature, but Mr Powys is much too good a writer to be lightly passed over, and it is a thousand pities that he should have damned himself, at least for the time being, by an attitude. His later books read like malicious parodies on his earlier.

Other arts can, other arts do, turn their backs on the world as it is revealed to the eye of the practical man. We no longer ask that music should imitate anything ; and painting and sculpture in their turn are being rapidly enfranchised from the tyranny of 'Nature'. A similar trend, away from representation and towards the abstract, may be discerned in poetry, drama, and the cinema ; the last two of which are free to borrow devices from the visual and plastic arts and so to stimulate the enjoyment due to visual and plastic rhythms. Not so the novel. The moment the novelist turns his back on life he forfeits his title. *Qua* novelist, he is concerned only with men and

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women who live according to the standards of a concrete and confusing world, and not according to the standards of a delightful but abstract pattern. Whether he likes it or not, he must represent. If he finds the world rather a dismal, or rather a disgusting, place—as well he may sometimes—two alternatives only are open to him: either to turn satirist and stay within the convention of fiction, or to give up the writing of fiction altogether. He cannot hold on to the world of everyday with one hand and grope about for some kind of fairyland with the other. At least, he cannot do it successfully—as the failures of Mr Walter de la Mare, Mr E. M. Forster, and Mr David Garnett prove. Fairyland is a delicious place to escape into, provided you have the right sort of mind to enjoy a sojourn there; but you must escape, you must let go your hold on the world of everyday, if only for the moment. You cannot have both together. Your celestial omnibus may freely ply for

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hire in any heaven of your imagining, but it must not call to set down passengers at Golder's Green and Putney. And the mischief about our present age is that, no matter how we hate it, not one of us can really let go his hold on it. We take Golder's Green and Putney along with us to indict our very dreams of heaven.

So much for the content of literature. What of the form? Here, our disillusionment in practical affairs has already begun to exert a marked influence on poetry, the drama (such as it is), and perhaps the short story; but on the novel, hardly at all. Poets, dramatists, and short-story writers have endeavoured to compensate for confusion in life by a tightening up of pattern in art, just as the painters, the sculptors, the musicians, and a few of the architects, are doing. And that is all to the good. Novelists ought to be consciously doing the same, but few of them are, and none of them boldly enough. Which is one of the reasons—

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I believe, the chief reason—why they are not giving us the masterpieces.<sup>1</sup>

Most important of all, however—for in the end everything hinges on this—the disillusionment of our age has resulted in a marked decline of spiritual quality in our fiction. It is often said that the best writers of any age are in advance of it. And so they are. But by the best writers we generally mean the best poets, the best philosophers, and the best scientists; but not necessarily, or even usually, the best novelists. Donne, Milton, Blake, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley; Spinoza, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and Señor Unamuno; Galileo, Leibnitz, Newton, Pasteur, and Herr Einstein: these were all definitely in advance of their age. But Fielding and Jane Austen, Scott and Thackeray, Turgenev and Henry James: these were not. The very nature of the novelist's art binds him to the present with bonds other writers are free from.

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of this point see the concluding section of this essay.



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He is first an observer, then a recorder. He must be not only in the world, but of it ; for how else should he gain the sympathy and understanding without which all his art is vain ? If his thought ranges far beyond that of his contemporaries, if his sensibility is painfully keener than theirs, and if his conduct breaks through most, or even many, of their well-established conventions, he will probably turn poet or philosopher, mystic or revolutionary ; and almost certainly he will discontinue writing novels. Witness Tolstoy. But if, as nearly always is the case, he remains in essentials a man of his time, the prevailing thought and temper of his time will determine the spiritual quality of his work.

For, if a novelist's work is to be significant and not merely entertaining, it is necessary that he should be a man of strong and comprehensive beliefs. It is not enough that his mind be capacious, with windows open to all the floating ideas of his day and genera-

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tion ; he must, like every other writer who aims at more than ephemeral popularity, organise these discrete ideas into a stable attitude towards the world, an attitude that readers can at least feel behind his work, even though neither he nor they can define it in terms of logic. This is his philosophy of life, and a novelist without a philosophy of life may safely be ignored.

This philosophy of his need not be orthodox, need not, that is to say, conform at all closely to the standard philosophy of his age as held by the man in the street. It may, of course. Fielding and Richardson, different though they were from each other in many respects, were both orthodox enough ; so were Sterne, Smollett, Jane Austen, Scott, Balzac, and Thackeray. Mr Hardy was not. If you like, Mr Hardy was an exception, and one of the most striking of recent times, to the rule that the novelist is seldom far in advance of his age : to which cause may be attributed the long delay before his

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work was generally recognised; and the wrath it still excites in obsolete minds like Mr Chesterton's. But it is important to remember that Mr Hardy was always a poet. And now that his poems have been published we can see more clearly that his philosophic attitude was the direct outcome of nineteenth-century science impinging on a poetic mind of singular depth and sensibility. It was not the attitude of the man in the street fifty years ago, though it is very nearly that of the man in the street to-day. But it was the prevailing attitude of the best scientific minds of fifty years ago—a tragic apprehension of the world as ruled by mechanical forces utterly indifferent to man's aims and desires. According to this philosophy, to man remains the duty of resisting and enduring, since only so can he affirm his own ideals of truth and justice, charity and honour. Nevertheless the forces against which he sets himself are stronger than he, and in the end they will break him,

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not from enmity or with conscious purpose, but unwittingly, mechanically, as a machine will break whatever living thing gets caught within its smoothly running wheels. The Immanent Will labours

all-unknowingly  
Like one whom reveries numb.

It works unconsciously, as heretofore,  
Eternal artistries in Circumstance,  
Whose patterns, wrought by rapt  
aesthetic rote,  
Seem in themselves Its single listless  
aim,  
And not their consequence.

And man may be likened to Egdon Heath :

A place perfectly accordant with man's nature—neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly : neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame ; but, like man, slighted and enduring ; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy immobility.

With this philosophy of life let us compare that of another novelist, later born than Mr Hardy but earlier dead,

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Joseph Conrad. For all their dissimilarity in most respects, these two men were strangely alike in their fundamental attitude towards the world; though in Conrad, no doubt, we may trace a certain melodramatic intolerance of fate that is lacking from the maturer and more equable Englishman, and a tendency, perhaps more Slavonic than English, perhaps more pelagian than terrestrial, to personify the forces of nature and endow them with a purposive malignancy which is denied to Mr Hardy's 'raptly magnipotent Will'. In this connection one remembers particularly the atmosphere with which Conrad invests the finest of his long-short stories, *Heart of Darkness*, and many of his purplest passages about the sea.

In Conrad, however, as in Mr Hardy, the burden of emphasis is thrown, not on the blind, mechanical fate which thwarts man's worthiest endeavours, but on man the faithful and enduring, who is thwarted. And this, after all,

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is a point of supreme importance. So sombre a creed as theirs might well seem unpropitious for a novelist, whose chief concern is with our human passions and desires, our human hopes and fears. If it is our destiny to be thwarted and broken, if human values are merely human, with no applicability beyond the narrow range of mankind, if the forces that rule the world know, and can know, nothing of love and hate, good and evil, joy and sorrow, then why trouble to record the doings of the impotent creatures that we are? Because, say both writers, human values are supremely worth proclaiming, for their own sake, irrespective of their ultimate success or failure in the world. Faithful and enduring, man may be broken by God, yet in his very defeat attain to a nobility that a blind and mechanical God can never approach.

Such a creed used to be called pessimistic, and perhaps when compared to the smug optimism of 'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world', it

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is. But it is also exultant. And it is this note of triumph, sounding like a ground bass through all the best work of both writers, that distinguishes them most impressively from those who have come after them.

For, with the passage of time, the philosophic attitude of Mr Hardy, so repellant to the ordinary man of his age, has become very nearly a commonplace to the ordinary man of ours. And with this change has gone a shifting of emphasis. The mechanical nature of the world has been accepted, but the note of exultant defiance on behalf of humanity has grown faint. The post-war novelist, if he touches on ultimate problems at all, does so in a different spirit, a lighter spirit. He appears, maybe, rather humbler. He is not so sure as Conrad that human affairs are worthy of respect. He says, in effect : ' Who are we, feeble, shiftless creatures that we are, to set ourselves up to judge and oppose the machine ? ' But this apparent humility is not often

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genuine; when it is not actually a fashionable and empty pose, it is the outcome of indifference and laziness. Nothing really matters, so why make a fuss and defy a mechanical God?

### § 5

The contrast between the prevailing temper of late Victorians and that of our post-war novelists on both sides of the Atlantic may be pointed in another way still—by noting the intrusion of satire into fiction and its steady growth therein down to the present day. Neither Hardy nor Conrad was a satirist by intention or habit. Samuel Butler was, and his influence, reinforced by that of his disciple, Mr Bernard Shaw, has been very great on writers of the twentieth century; many of his ideas, in fact, have passed so completely into the



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stuff of our thinking that we cannot always detect their origin. Besides, of the three most important Edwardian novelists, Mr Wells, Mr Galsworthy, and Mr Bennett, the first two were unmistakable satirists, always with one sociological axe or another to grind, and always apt to grind it at the wrong time and so diminish the aesthetic quality of their books. On this point Mr Wells himself has been pleasantly frank.

‘ Personally ’, he says, in his preface to Mr Swinnerton’s *Nocturne*, ‘ I have no use at all for life as it is, except as raw material. It bores me to look at things unless there is also the idea of doing something with them . . . In the books I have written, it is always about life being altered I write, or about people developing schemes for altering life. And I have never once “ presented ” life. My apparently most objective books are criticisms and incitements to change.’

To which Mrs Woolf has objected that novels constructed on that plan leave a sense of incompleteness. ‘ In order

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to complete them it seems necessary to do something—to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque.' Whereas in great novels, she says, everything is within the book.<sup>1</sup>

This raises an issue that is not unimportant, namely: How far is satire permissible in fiction? Satire is a weapon of offence, a 'practical' weapon; the driving force behind it is the desire Mr Wells freely confesses to, the desire to get life altered in some more or less specific ways. One at least of the motives in the mind of Aristophanes when he wrote *The Clouds* was to diminish the prestige of Socrates and the Sophists in contemporary Athens; Dryden wrote and published the first part of *Absalom and Achitophel* to inflame public feeling against Shaftesbury, and, incidentally, to pay off a number of old private scores; Jonathan Swift, soured by the failure of his ambitions in England, wrote the

<sup>1</sup> 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,' p. 12

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first two books of *Gulliver's Travels* to score off the English politicians and churchmen who had refused to do anything for him ; Samuel Butler wrote *Erewhon* to show up half the alleged virtues of Victorian England. Always and of necessity there is an extrinsic purpose behind satire, that is to say, a purpose not contained within the book itself ; and no definition so narrow as to exclude *The Clouds*, *Absalom and Achitophel*, *The Dunciad*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Vision of Judgement*, and *Erewhon* from the canon of great literature, is worth wasting time on. Only Croceans—now, happily, a rapidly diminishing band of second-rate academics—will deny that literature may serve a practical as well as an aesthetic purpose ; the test being : Does the book remain aesthetically satisfying after its practical purpose has been fulfilled or superseded ? And some of Mr Wells's novels and Mr Shaw's plays will stand this test ; others will not ; but in either event it is not

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the mere presence or absence of satiric motives that decides the issue.

The most notable of Mr Wells's followers to-day is Mr Sinclair Lewis, a writer difficult to classify except as a satirist, and who, as a novelist, can be called modern more by courtesy than by right. But for the accidents that his only important books, *Babbitt* and *Martin Arrowsmith*, were published after the war and dealt in the main with post-war themes, it would be more appropriate to classify him with authors of the pre-war generation ; since neither in manner nor in spirit is he really up to date.

In manner, he is copious without subtlety, and phonographic without resonance. In spirit, he is no thorough-paced agnostic ; he believes very passionately in certain human values, simple and genuine human values ; and just because he believes in them, attacks with all the ridicule and invective at his command the institutions, customs and fixed habits of America

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that are trying to crush these values out. As a satirist, he may be effective ; he has been, in the past, and probably will be again—if only he will keep his temper, which he lost in writing *Elmer Gantry*. As a novelist he can hardly be ranked very high, and his influence on the novel as a form of art is negligible.

Nearly all contemporary novelists, however, are satiric in their degree. And the contrast between Mr Sinclair Lewis on the one hand, and, say, Mr Norman Douglas and Mr Aldous Huxley on the other, is startling in its revelation of the difference between the age that is past and the age that we actually live in. Mr Aldous Huxley is the typical, or perhaps we should say, most fashionable, exponent of contemporary *accidie*. Whereas Mr Lewis has convictions, some of them very definite, others none the less fierce for being rather indefinite, it is difficult to say what, if anything, Mr Huxley could be found convinced of. His normal attitude can be summed up in the

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question: Is there anything, living or dead, spiritual or sensual, which isn't humbug? 'Consider well your neighbour, what an imbecile he is,' says Mr Norman Douglas somewhere. And that is exactly what Mr Huxley has been doing for the last eight years. By now he is debonair, hardly ever savage, but graceful, interrogative, ironically amused that human beings should behave as foolishly as they do, well-mannered without being friendly or warm-hearted, and withal singularly honest about himself. No one can justly accuse him of posing. Having considered his neighbour and found what an imbecile the fellow is, he is always ready to turn round and consider himself and make the same discovery. His latest volume of essays he has entitled *Jesting Pilate*—and there is something terrifyingly appropriate in the title. He is disillusionment embodied. Hence his popularity with the intelligentsia.

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' God is a spirit, a spirit, a spirit,' says Miss Thriplow to herself in one of the cleverest and most amusing passages of *Those Barren Leaves*. ' She tried to picture something huge and empty, but alive. A huge flat expanse of sand, for example, and over it a huge blank dome of sky ; and above the sky everything would be tremulous and shimmering with heat—an emptiness that was yet alive. A spirit, an all-pervading spirit. God is a spirit. Three camels appeared on the horizon of the sandy plain and went lolloping along in an absurd ungainly fashion from left to right. Miss Thriplow made an effort and dismissed them. God is a spirit, she said aloud. But of all animals camels are really almost the queerest ; when one thinks of their frightfully supercilious faces, with their protruding under lips like the last Hapsburg kings of Spain . . . No, no ; God is a spirit, all-pervading, everywhere. All the universes are made one in him. Layer upon layer . . . A Neapolitan ice floated up out of the darkness.'

And so on for another page and a half.

This quotation may be taken to measure the difference between the spiritual attitude of most of us to-day

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—for we are all made one in Miss Thriplow—and that of Mr Hardy in the age that is past. Mr Hardy disbelieved in God as a spirit, and so, of course, does Miss Thriplow—who is a post-war novelist. But whereas Mr Hardy's disbelief possessed him, Miss Thriplow's is only one among many other entertaining philosophical problems to be juggled with in bed. If you like, Mr Hardy was obsessed with God, whereas Miss Thriplow is obsessed with the fear of obsessions.

Thus, the final effect left on the reader by all Mr Huxley's books is profound dissatisfaction that a man so clever, so genial, with so marked a sense of style—don't we all wish we had it?—so admirable an ear for words, so genuine a talent, should have written nothing of lasting value except one short and one long-short story.<sup>1</sup> It is puzzling. But the truth seems

<sup>1</sup> 'Young Archimedes' and 'Uncle Spencer' in the volume entitled *Little Mexican*.



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to be this: a novelist must, not be entirely without convictions, for he must, at the very least, believe in human beings. And Mr Huxley does not. For all his brilliance, he has created only one character that can stand on its own feet. Except for Uncle Spencer, all the characters in his books are like stage masks that he slips behind and talks very prettily through. Calamy, Cardan, Chelifer, Mrs Aldwinkle, Lypiatt, Mercaptan, Gumbril Senior, Gumbril Junior, Mrs Viveash, and the rest—remove the author, and down they topple like the sheets of pasteboard they are. Like Mr Lewis, Mr Huxley dislikes shams, but he has none of the American's prophetic fire in him. (Prophetic fire is rather *démodé*.) Looking open-eyed at the world, he sees it remarkably full of shams, and records what he sees with all the polite good humour that is lacking from *Elmer Gantry*. Yet he remains incapable of understanding, and so

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of sympathising with, the human beings who deceive themselves and endeavour to deceive others. Himself, he is honest, surprisingly so. He does not pretend to be what he isn't. And occasionally, as in *Antic Hay*, he allows himself a kind of simulated anger at the spectacle of others less honest than he. Yet he never gets any further than simulated anger. He cannot even hate properly. He strips human beings of their fine clothes and compels them to stand naked and shamefaced before the reader ; he cannot, or will not, go deeper than their skins and comprehend the workings of their hearts. He is sentimentally afraid of being sentimental. And so, as Mr Edwin Muir has very justly said, his art remains one of exposure, not one of comprehension.

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### § 6

So far we have considered certain general characteristics of the age that have found expression in contemporary fiction, and we have now to consider certain literary and scientific influences that have more specifically affected its technique.

The first and most important of these is the psychological influence, which derives from several different sources, both literary and scientific. Beginning, no doubt, with Flaubert,<sup>1</sup> it did not gain much weight in English fiction till the later period of Henry James, the period of *What Maisie Knew* (1898), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1905). I do not know whether this Henry James—

<sup>1</sup> Stendhal has come *direct* to England only very lately. Hitherto he has come only indirectly, through other French writers and through the Russians.

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who should be clearly distinguished from his earlier self, author of *The American* (1877), *Daisy Miller* (1878), and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881)—is much read nowadays; I imagine not. But his influence on writers has been strong—and still is, even when they are totally unaware of it. He was, if not the first, certainly the most deliberate, of the novelists who virtually abolished the story, reduced events to the barest minimum, and concerned themselves with minute analysis of inner consciousness. It was he, too, who most unflinchingly maintained 'the point of view'. Readers of *What Maisie Knew*, for example, are permitted to discover only what she knew, and to discover it only in the slow, roundabout, effortful ways in which she discovered it. And clearly, what she knew was not really of the least importance, except because it was *her* knowledge, and because it had profound emotional effects on her. Not events, but the

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causes and repercussions of events in consciousness—that was what the later Henry James regarded as the prime business of the novelist. Analysis and explanation, then more analysis and explanation—that was the formula.

Then came Joseph Conrad, who acknowledged his indebtedness to James, and borrowed something of his method. What he borrowed from this source was the least valuable of what appears in his books, because its chief results were prolixity, confusion, and that tortuous manner of writing a story within a story and then another story within that, which makes *Chance* one of the most intolerable novels ever written by a man of genius. Conrad had too little of the chill, detached, scientific clarity of vision that alone makes the detailed analytical method bearable in fiction; his poetic imagination—stimulated by his close study of Turgenev—his extraordinary sensitivity to atmosphere, and his inherent tendency

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towards mystery, cut right across the tradition of Henry James and made nonsense of it. If we, the readers, do not always understand Henry James's characters, we are nevertheless persuaded that he does. In reading Conrad we have no like source of comfort. Conrad's straightforward men are unsurpassed—Tom Lingard, Almayer, Nostromo, Schomberg, for instance. But his mysterious women remain mysterious, to him as much as to us. What do we know of Doña Rita at the end of *The Arrow of Gold*? What does her author know? He tries to see her through the eyes of Mills, that shadowy but effective Englishman who begins and ends the book; the eyes of J.K. Blunt, 'américain, catholique, et gentilhomme' who lives by his sword and his self-esteem; the eyes of Blunt's intriguing mother, who is admirable; the eyes of Rita's angular sister Thérèse; and the eyes of M. George, who is love-bewitched. And at the end has he

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really seen her at all? Neyer once.

The next influence that struck English fiction, this time rather overwhelmingly, was that of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, indisputably the two greatest psychological novelists in European literature. Tolstoy was the earlier known in England, and will be found ultimately to have had the more powerful and lasting effect; but immediately, that is, for the period 1900-1920, Dostoevsky was the more important. Though *Crime and Punishment* had been translated into English as far back as 1885, and Dostoevsky's other novels were known to some readers through translations into French, it was not until Mrs Garnett's masterly translations began to appear in 1912 that English writers in general awoke to the significance of the author of *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.<sup>1</sup> The first result of this awaken-

<sup>1</sup> Time brings its revenges indeed! Dostoevsky's death in 1881 was not even referred to in the London Press.

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ing was oddly perverse. The greatness of Dostoevsky as a novelist—his astounding insight into human motive, his strong sense of drama, his mastery in dialogue, his power of integrating diverse and often contradictory revelations of character into concrete figures as real and unique in their own peculiar world as Tolstoy's in the actual world we live in—was for the most part overlooked. He was taken as first and foremost a great thinker. His *ideas* were discussed, wrangled over, and fervently preached by disciples. And in so far as his practice in the craft of fiction was considered at all, it was hastily assumed that he had dealt yet another blow, and possibly the final one, at form, or plot ; whereas in fact he had a much stronger sense of plot than Tolstoy. Of the two writers, Tolstoy was the more analytical and formless, Dostoevsky the more intensely dramatic. But formless 'slices of life' became fashionable, and at the same time



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was fostered a new interest, due also in large measure to Dostoevsky, in morbid, abnormal, or actually pathological states of mind. One way or another, the waters of the English novel were rather badly muddied for a time.

Not long after, came the flood of psycho-analysis, which muddied them still further. Few English novelists had paid much attention to academic psychology, unless in a desultory way to the writings of William James, which were always so much easier and more illuminating to read than the later novels of his brother.<sup>1</sup> And no wonder academic psychology in English had been mainly ignored, since, apart from William James, it had always been

<sup>1</sup> 'William James rendit facile, a-t-on dit, l'étude de la métaphysique, et Henry James a rendu difficile l'étude du roman. La boutade n'est pas sans vérité. Mais il serait plus exact encore de dire que William a passé sa vie à substituer le concret à l'abstrait, l'expérience à l'explication, tandis que Henry s'efforçait d'expliquer le concret par l'abstrait, et la vie par le mécanisme.' Chevalley, *op cit*, p 105

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rather poor stuff. The consequence was, however, that when the works of Freud and Jung, Ferenczi and Adler, reached England and America in translation, novelists seldom had the necessary training in scientific method or the necessary acquaintance with psychological principles already established, to receive the new hypotheses of the unconscious with critical discrimination. Psycho-analysis became for a time an appalling craze, and writers either succumbed to it, as to an epidemic of influenza, or reacted against it with blind and ridiculous enmity. Even now, when the craze appears to be safely over, it is difficult for critics to keep a cool pen. So many good novels have been spoiled by the needless intrusion of psycho-analytic ideas, imperfectly assimilated or only too perfectly assimilated,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps nothing could have saved Mr D. H. Lawrence from himself, but it is a thousand pities that he should have chanced to pass through a psycho-analytic phase in his development; because at one time he looked like being the

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that we are apt to deny the immense contributions which Freud has made to our knowledge of human nature, and the very real debt which every contemporary novelist ought to acknowledge to him. If the best of psycho-analysis—and the best is none so minute a part of it, after all—cannot be taken up into the mental equipment of the novelist of to-day and to-morrow, so much the worse for him ; he will be the poorer without it.

Another contemporary psychologist whose influence, both direct and indirect, on English and American writers must be taken into account, is Dr William McDougall. Though less original than is often supposed, he has succeeded in popularising a system of psychology based on instincts

greatest novelist of our generation. One is forced, likewise, to regret the psycho-analytic influence on Mr J. D. Beresford, Miss May Sinclair, and Miss Rebecca West.

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and primary emotions, which derives unmistakably from James, Ribot, H. R. Marshall, and Shand, which has held its own remarkably well for nearly twenty years, and which, once it has been modified by notions drawn from psycho-analysis and the newer *Gestalt* psychology of Kohler and Koffka, will probably continue to hold its own for some twenty more. With the details of this system we are not concerned here. It is enough to note that its relative simplicity, its frank revolt against intellectualism, its air of being in complete accord with the main findings of modern biology, together with the ease and felicity of Dr McDougall's exposition, have caused it to be readily accepted by writers who are not professed psychologists but willingly borrow from professed psychologists whatever can be helpful in fiction. And this *behaviour* psychology—which must be sharply distinguished from *Behaviorism*, an American heresy of no literary, and not

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much scientific, importance — has proved both helpful and harmful. It has simplified many of the issues for the novelist, but unhappily it has simplified some of them too much. Acting in conjunction with psycho-analysis, it has induced certain contemporary authors to think, and to construct their characters, in terms of crude and abstract nature, which is relatively general and undifferentiated, instead of in terms of concrete nurture, which is always complex and individual. By this means they have managed to create only lifeless types, intended to illustrate the dominance of some instinct, primary emotion, repressed complex, or what not. And when such simplification goes along with the search for abnormalities, the method becomes curiously self-destructive. 'One gets the impression', says Mr Gould very justly, 'that the oddity, instead of showing So-and-So to be concretely and individually So-and-So, merely shows So-and-So to be as odd

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as everybody else, and odd in the same way as everybody else.'<sup>1</sup>

It is nonsense to maintain, as is still done by some dear old academics (probably Oxonians), that a knowledge of psychology, the science, is harmful to the novelist. Other things being equal, the more thoroughly he has studied it, as expounded to-day by Freud, McDougall, Spearman, Janet, Piéron, Woodworth, Kohler, etc., the better novelist he is likely to be. But he must absorb it, and having done so, transform it into the terms of his own art. There is no reason why he should not see an individual in the light of a theory. Dostoevsky constantly did. But he must, like Dostoevsky, see the individual, and not just the theory. Science uses examples to vivify generalizations; an art may use generalizations to winnow the concrete example of its inessential chaff.

To these scientific influences must be

<sup>1</sup> *The English Novel of To-day*, p. 38.

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added that of three recent novelists of remarkable powers, the late Marcel Proust, Mr James Joyce, and Miss Dorothy Richardson. It so happened that all three began to write about the same time, just before the war ; and that each worked out his or her method independently of the others. Yet, with minor differences, all three are aiming at the same thing, and in much the same way : the entirely frank revelation in detail of their own inner consciousness. Miss Richardson has never had a large public, and probably never will ; she is less important than the other two, and her work has been overshadowed by theirs. Mr Joyce has enjoyed a *succès de scandale*, owing to the banning of his *Ulysses* in England and the vituperation with which he has been assailed by moralistic English critics ; for the moment, and for English fiction, he is the most important of the three, though it is unlikely he will remain so much longer. Proust has had a *succès d'estime*,

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despite his dullness ; it is fashionable to praise him, and to pretend that one has read him.

Mr Joyce, I said, is the most important of the three—for the moment. Every contemporary novelist in England and America must have read *Ulysses*, and tried to understand just what its author was getting at ; and most have imitated it in some degree, for good or for ill, and more or less wittingly. There is no escaping it. For Mr Joyce is not only a very great writer, with a more complete command of English as a literary medium and a more profound gift for Aristophanic and Rabelaisian comedy than any writer since Shakespeare ; he exerts, besides, the uncanny fascination of the extremist. Though few can write objectively so well as he, when he wants to—think of the magnificent opening of *Ulysses*—he no longer wants to, he no longer believes in objectivity as a literary means. He is the complete subjectivist. As we have seen, there



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has been in European fiction during the last fifty or more years a persistent tendency away from objectivity and towards the ever more minute and analytic exposition of mental life ; and Mr Joyce has carried this tendency as far as it apparently can go, that is to say, considerably farther than it can go with safety. He affects to surrender himself utterly to the stream of consciousness, this being, on his view, the only trustworthy source of truth. Ideas and images as they occur are set down. Whether they are relevant or not to the eye of reason matters nothing, since the eye of reason is itself suspect. Selection in accordance with some previously thought-out plan is eschewed, for selection, too, is a rational, and therefore a cozening, operation. Real life is not arranged according to plan ; it just happens. And so art must be allowed to just happen likewise. The story, already jettisoned by Henry James, neglected by Tolstoy, encrusted

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with speculation by Dostoevsky, twisted and contorted beyond recognition by Conrad, would, if Mr Joyce had his way, be buried irrecoverably fathoms deep in the wastes of the unconscious. And overboard after it would go grammar, punctuation, capital letters, and every other convention which appears to restrict the flow of the divine unreason.

This reads like a parody. I wish it were. No exposition of Mr Joyce's method in *Ulysses*—to say nothing of his later outbreaks in the manner made familiar by Miss Gertrude Stein—could be madder than the book itself ; which, for the rest, is colossal, a colossal failure to be the masterpiece of our day and generation. Mr Joyce has powers in comparison with which those of any six other contemporary novelists added together hardly count ; but they are powers juxtaposed and summed, not organized. He believes so unreservedly in chaos that he tries to represent it, whereas, if art

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means anything at all, it means the resolution of chaos into order.

A summary statement like this of the chief tendencies that have helped to make our post-war fiction what it is, would be incomplete without references to Chehov, and to the reaction that has set in against the sociological methods of Mr Wells, Mr Galsworthy, and Mr Bennett. It might seem that Chehov had influenced only the short story. That, undoubtedly, he has done. Indeed, one might almost say that he has refashioned the short story for good. But certain post-war authors have adapted his method, or something very like it, to the writing of novels also; so that, instead of a continuous narrative of interconnected events, or a series of careful and detailed psychological analyses of mental processes, they give us a succession of vivid and revealing but seemingly disconnected episodes—such episodes as Baudelaire had in mind when he wrote :

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*Dans certains états de l'ame presque surnaturels, la profondeur de la vie toute entière se révèle dans le spectacle, si ordinaire qu'il soit, qu'on a sous les yeux. Il en devient le symbole.*<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the best examples in English are to be found in Mrs Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, which is too discrete to be successful, *Mrs Dalloway*, which is a masterpiece of its kind, and *To the Lighthouse*, which is disappointing only because it does not mark a definite advance on *Mrs Dalloway* in the same or a different kind. For we have been led to expect a continuous advance in the work of Mrs Woolf. Her changes of method and the growth of her peculiar powers, from *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, through *Monday and Tuesday*, to the three later novels, have been startling. It would seem that, having gone as far as she could in the psychological manner

<sup>1</sup> I owe this quotation and its application to Chehov, to Mr Middleton Murry's *Discoveries*. See especially pp 141 ff.

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of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and been plainly dissatisfied with the results, she had then set herself to try out the manner of Chehov and Katherine Mansfield. And this manner, notwithstanding all appearances to the contrary, is poetical rather than psychological. It depends, not on detached, intellectual analysis of mental processes, but on the rigorous selection of details of high emotional potentiality. Thoughtful readers have puzzled and puzzled to explain how it is that Mrs Woolf can make quite ordinary life so thrilling, so enthralling; how it is that she can hold our interest through page after page in which hardly anything happens, and in which even the things that do happen are trivial in the extreme. Clarissa Dalloway goes to buy the flowers for her party, sews her green dress, says Thank you to Lucy her maid; Peter Walsh tramps up Whitehall, dawdles in Regent's Park, dines at his hotel; Mrs Ramsay walks into the village

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with the unpleasant young man Tansley: and it all seems important! It is important, not in itself, but in the moods and interpenetrating emotions which Mrs Woolf uses it to evoke. She works embroideries on the commonplace, but it is the embroideries, and not their commonplace ground, that delight us.

It is Mrs Woolf, too, who has most openly expressed the reaction against the sociological methods of the Edwardians. In her *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* she begins by accepting a dictum of Mr Bennett's that 'the foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else.' Then she quarrels with Mr Bennett, Mr Wells, and Mr Galsworthy because they have failed to do this very thing that matters supremely. She says:

Mrs Brown is human nature, Mrs Brown changes only on the surface . . . and not one of the Edwardian writers has so much as looked at her. They have looked very

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powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window ; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the railway carriage ; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature . . . They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there. To give them their due, they have made that house much better worth living in. But if you hold that novels are in the first place about people, and only in the second place about the houses they live in, that is the wrong way to set about it.

An overstatement, certainly, as we should expect in a paper read before a university society and intended to provoke argument. And the implication that might be drawn from it, that Mrs Woolf herself works on the opposite method, looking directly at Mrs Brown and neglecting ' the fabric of things,' is untrue. She is much too good a novelist to do anything of the kind. Indeed, the background of London on a summer's day is all-

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important in *Mrs Dalloway*. It is not the virtual hero of the book, as New York is the virtual hero of Mr John dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*; but the characters of Clarissa, Hugh Whitbread, Peter Walsh, Lucrezia Warren Smith, Doris Kilman, and the rest, emerge from the background and fade into it again, and between 'the fabric of things' and the fabric of human nature there is no hard and fast division.

The dissatisfaction with the methods of the Edwardians, however, which many of us feel, and which Mrs Woolf has only exaggerated a little in order to provoke discussion, is significant in this, that it proves but another indication of the trend of modern fiction from objective to subjective, from outer semblance to alleged inner reality.



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### § 7

Such being the principal tendencies that have gone to mould the English novel of to-day, what have we reason to expect from the English novel of to-morrow? Much—but only on one condition. The material lying ready to hand is rich and varied, and of technical ability to shape it there is enough and to spare. One is tempted to say that never before in the history of English or American literature has the material been so rich or the general level of craftsmanship so high. But one thing is lacking, and until that is supplied all of us who are writing novels to-day are only marking time. What we need and must have, if any of our work is to live for more than a publishing season, is a new philosophical synthesis, a new imaginative

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attitude towards the world. Nothing else will serve.

Fortunately, we need not just fold our hands and wait. The new philosophical synthesis has already been sketched for us, and all we have to do is to lay hold on it intellectually, and then transform it into terms of the creative imagination. The chief of our troubles is that most of us are hopelessly obsolete in our knowledge of science. We are still bogged fast in the dreary mechanical theories of the nineteenth century. The most advanced in appearance and their own estimation are in fact the most backward: the present philosophy of Mr Joyce could hardly have been farther out of date and more reactionary, had he remained a priest of the Roman Catholic Church; and between the philosophy of President Coolidge (supposing him to have one) and that of Mr John dos Passos, there is uncommonly little to choose. For the plain fact is that mechanistic

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materialism, the philosophical creed that served the turn of Mr Thomas Hardy because he reacted against it with passionate defiance on behalf of mankind, and which contemporary writers accept rather with boredom than with passion of any sort, is dead, stone dead. The leading thinkers of to-day, in metaphysics, psychology, biology, physiology, and mathematical physics, have just quietly killed it and passed on ; and the only people old-fashioned enough to believe that it still lives are parsons (who got left behind in the seventeenth century and have never caught up since), chemists (always the worst educated and therefore the most bigoted of the scientists), surgeons (who are much too busy getting fortunes and titles to remember any science worth speaking of), 'advanced' poets anthropologically inclined like Mr T. S. Eliot, and 'advanced' prose-writers fast becoming incoherent like Mr James Joyce and Miss Gertrude Stein.

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Let the novelists of to-day once realize this, and realize, besides, all the aesthetic significance that lies behind the alternative philosophy now being presented to us in one or another of its aspects by Professors Alexander, Lloyd Morgan, Whitehead, J. S. Haldane, McDougall, Kohler, Koffka, Eddington, and Rutherford—and English and American fiction will be transformed. A veritable second Renaissance in thought is in progress, here and now, under our noses ; and novelists, backward and complacent though they are, cannot remain unaware of it much longer. Compared to it, all the work of Proust, Mr Joyce, Mr Eliot, Mr Conrad Aiken, Mr Sherwood Anderson, and Mr Carl Sandburg, is merest trifling with antiquated themes and methods. For the philosophy that is being propounded now—we may call it indifferently the philosophy of purpose, or of emergent evolution, or of organic realism, or, best of all perhaps, of form (*Gestalt*)—

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is overwhelming in its implications. Imaginatively apprehended, it changes our whole attitude towards the world ; it displaces mechanism by purpose in vital affairs ; it reaffirms values that nineteenth-century science did its best to annihilate : most important of all for literature, it reinstates the soul.

Form, shape, pattern, organic purpose—is not this precisely what the novel of to-day so manifestly lacks ? Give the novelist, instead of a feeble, hesitant and rather shamefaced ‘ sense of form,’ the burning conviction that form is the first principle of life, nay more, of the world as a whole, and what will he not be able to do ? Henry James, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Professor Freud, Mr Joyce, Miss Richardson, and, to a smaller extent, Marcel Proust, have encouraged him to neglect inherent form, or plot, to abolish the story, to concentrate upon the inner life of relatively isolated characters. Analysis, analysis, analysis—that has been the wellnigh unvarying formula.

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The gain in subtlety and psychological understanding has been immense, and whatever happens, must be preserved for the future. We shall never go back to plain, untutored objectivity. But extreme subjectivity, aiming sincerely at truth, has missed it again and again, and that for two reasons. It has fostered the twin delusions, that a mind consists of its assembled parts, like a motor-car engine which can be taken to pieces and put together again ; and that a single mind can be revealed in isolation from its fellows and unrelated to its inorganic surroundings. Stress the concept of organism instead of the concept of Cartesian matter, as the ultimate category of the world, and both these delusions are at once shown up. And that is exactly what is now being done. The concept of organism, which till recently was extended downwards in the scale of existence to cover nothing more elementary than plants, is now being used as the only possible concept to

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explain happenings in the inorganic world. The prophecy of Samuel Butler :

Death is being defeated at all points. No sooner do we think that we have got a *bona fide* barrier than it breaks down. The divisions between varieties, species, genus, all gone ; between instinct and reason, gone ; between animals and plants, gone ; between man and the lower animals, gone ; so, ere long, the division between organic and inorganic will go and will take with it the division between mind and matter.<sup>1</sup>—

this prophecy, which at the time it was written must have sounded like another *boutade* by the *enfant terrible* of literature and science, is now being literally fulfilled. A revolutionary change indeed ! The world of matter, acting and reacting in space *and* time according to the mechanical laws of Newtonian physics, is discerned now to be no more than an abstract and temporary construction of the human intelligence, convenient for certain

<sup>1</sup> *Note Books*, p. 78.

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practical affairs, like engineering, but highly inconvenient or positively false for certain others, like biology or religion or economics or the comprehension of atomic structure.

Now, in the first place, an organism, how lowly soever, is more than the sum of its parts,<sup>1</sup> and its principle of coherence and endurance is its pattern. Without enduring pattern it would be the prey of environment, and its existence would be impossible; with enduring pattern it is able to deal uniformly with its environment, and by impressing itself upon this, attain, and retain, its identity. And in the second place, no organism is isolated. Its unity, its coherence, is not merely intrinsic, but extrinsic also; it is inter-fused with other organisms. Pattern is not private only, but dependent on the interaction between the thing patterned and other things similarly

<sup>1</sup> As General Smuts has pointed out (in 'Holism and Evolution') even water is something *more* than two parts of hydrogen and one of oxygen.



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or differently patterned in space-time. 'Concrete fact', says Professor Whitehead, 'is process'.

Its primary analysis is into underlying activity of prehension, [by which term Professor Whitehead means 'uncognitive apprehension', or, if you like, unconscious patterning], and into realized prehensive events. Each event is an individual matter of fact issuing from an individualisation of the substrate activity. But individualisation does not mean substantial independence. . . . We can be content with a provisional realism in which nature is conceived as a complex of prehensive unifications. . . . A prehension is a process of unifying. Accordingly, nature is a process of expansive development, necessarily transitional from prehension to prehension. What is achieved is thereby passed beyond, but it is also retained as having aspects of itself present to prehensions which lie beyond it.<sup>1</sup>

Apply this, not as cold metaphysics intellectually apprehended, but as hot conviction seized and impregnated by

<sup>1</sup> 'Science and the Modern World,' pp. 99, 101, 102.

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imagination, to the art of fiction, and at once the flat inadequacy of our contemporary novels is exposed. Contemporary novelists do not believe with all their heart in the *whole*, the comprehensive pattern which is made up of lesser patterns interlocking and interfusing, *no one of which is sacrificed to any other* but each one of which finds its reality and fulfilment *in* the others; they don't believe in it for fiction, because they don't believe in it for life. Even so delicate and beautiful a piece of work as *Mrs Dalloway* fails to stand the test. Mr Edwin Muir has said of Mrs Virginia Woolf that she is virtually alone among modern novelists in meeting her characters 'on the level,' on the same plane, without a barrier of irony, veiled hostility, or open disgust. 'She might walk into her novels and be at home in them.'<sup>1</sup> We may doubt that. Into *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*,

<sup>1</sup> Edwin Muir, *Transition*, p. 67.

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yes, she might walk into these ; but not into *Mrs Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse*. For no mortal can walk into a flat canvas and be at home there. The beauty of *Mrs Dalloway* is the beauty of a two-dimensional picture, 'composed' according to the standards of pictorial art ; it is fragile and delightful, as a beautiful picture is ; but it lacks entirely just that four-dimensional solidity which human beings live in, that four-dimensional solidity reproduced in a novel by Mr Hardy, and, most wonderfully of all, in a novel by Tolstoy. Look only full-face at Clarissa and the other characters grouped about her, and you are charmed with the subtle beauty of the portraiture ; yet you cannot walk round and view them from the varying angles of real life.

How could you, on the method Mrs Woolf has adopted ? Faithful to contemporary tradition, she has not constructed a story. Several different stories, disconnected but juxtaposed,

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emerge fitfully in the course of the book, by means of a sensitive process of feeling backwards—the same sensitive and deliberate *recherche du temps perdu* that was undertaken so memorably by Proust. And though we may admire the brilliance and the delicacy of this searching for the past, with its sure and subtle manipulation of visual images and prose cadences to evoke the appropriate emotions; though we may declare, as I do, that there is nothing finer than this in post-war fiction; and though we may be sure that something of the same power will be carried forward into the novels of to-morrow; yet in the end we must admit that by this method not even Mrs Woolf can make life real and significant in the way it has been made real and significant in the past by novelists of lower gifts. None of the several stories in *Mrs Dalloway* is shaped into a concrete pattern, nor is any necessary, because organic, connection between them to be found. There is no orderly

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progression according to plan in time, or—to adopt the modern philosophical term that means so much more than it appears to—in space-time. And the reason seems plain. In this and other good contemporary novels the author has consciously or unconsciously accepted the belief, the product of incomplete and abstract scientific theory, that life does not progress according to plan, but just happens. As one of the characters in *To the Lighthouse* expresses it, a little mournfully

What was it then ? What did it mean ? Could things thrust their hands up and grip one ; could the blade cut ; the fist grasp ? Was there no safety ? No learning by heart of the ways of the world ? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air ? Could it be, even for elderly people, that this was life ?—startling, unexpected, unknown.

Well, the belief that life is *only* startling, unexpected, unknown, *only*

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a leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air, is a delusion. People in real life may be permitted to suffer from it, and so may characters in books ; but novelists may not. Plan, shape, form, organic pattern, call it what you will—that is the ultimate fact about life, and not until novelists apprehend it, not until their apprehension of it possesses them like a mystical revelation of truth, will their work attain to classic rank.

There might be lovers [we are still among the thoughts of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*] whose gift it was to choose out the elements of things and place them together and so, giving them a wholeness not theirs in life, make of some scene, or meeting of people (all now gone and separate), one of those globed compacted things over which thought lingers, and love plays.

There might be ? There must be. This, just this, must be the aim of the novelist of to-morrow. It will be, for he will have rid himself of

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the false beliefs oppressing the novelist of to-day, that the wholeness of things is 'not theirs in life,' and that all attempts to achieve wholeness in art must remain at best a sort of pretty-pretty deception. He will believe instead that in shaping his creation into an organic pattern he is working in the very spirit of life itself, and that the 'globed compacted things' he makes contain the same kind of reality, the same kind of truth, as he can find all round him in the world of hard, unadulterate fact. He will know that he selects only in order to reveal what *is*.

Does this mean a turning away again from the subjective to the objective in point of method? Not necessarily. But if it did, what then? Fine work has been done in the objective manner in the past; indeed, is being done now by some of our contemporaries, notably by Miss Willa Cather in America. Consider, for example, this passage from *A Lost*

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*Lady*—how effective it is in its stark objectivity, how little it would be improved by the intrusion of any psychological analysis :

The sky was burning with the soft pink and silver of a cloudless summer dawn. The heavy, bowed grasses splashed him to the knees. All over the marsh, snow-on-the-mountain, globed with dew, made cool sheets of silver, and the swamp milkweed spread its flat, raspberry-coloured clusters. There was an almost religious purity about the fresh morning air, the tender sky, the grass and flowers with the sheen of early dew upon them. There was in all living things something limpid and joyous—like the wet, morning call of the birds, flying up through the unstained atmosphere. Out of the saffron east, a thin, yellow, wine-like sunshine began to gild the fragrant meadows and the glistening tops of the grove. . . .

Under the bluffs that overhung the marsh he came upon thickets of wild roses, with flaming buds, just beginning to open. Where they had opened, their petals were stained with that burning rose-colour which is always gone by noon—a dye made of sunlight and morning and moisture, so intense that it cannot possibly



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last . . . must fade, like ecstasy. Niel took out his knife and began to cut the stiff stems, crowded with red thorns.

He would make a bouquet for a lovely lady. . . . He would leave them just outside one of the French windows of her bedroom. When she opened her shutters to let in the light, she would find them—and they would perhaps give her a sudden distaste for coarse worldlings like Frank Ellinger.

After tying his flowers with a twist of meadow grass, he went up the hill through the grove and softly round the still house to the north side of Mrs Forrester's own room, where the door-like green shutters were closed. As he bent to place the flowers on the sill, he heard from within a woman's soft laughter; impatient, indulgent, teasing, eager. Then another laugh, very different, a man's. And it was fat and lazy—ended in something like a yawn.

Niel found himself at the foot of the hill on the wooden bridge, his face hot, his temples beating, his eyes blind with anger. In his hand he still carried the prickly bunch of wild roses. He threw them over the wire fence into a mudhole the cattle had trampled under the bank of the creek.

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There is no need to suppose, however, that the novel of to-morrow will as a rule be starkly objective to this degree. On the contrary, it will almost certainly carry forward all the psychological subtlety and power of analysis that we find in the novel of to-day. But in it analysis will be checked and limited by the design of the whole, will be always controlled by the primary need for synthesis.

William James used to call attention to the failure of English to distinguish between *scire* and *cognoscere*, *savoir* and *connaître*, *wissen* and *kennen*. We *know* the transcendental deduction of the categories and the quantum theory, and we also *know* the house-fly when we see it ; we *know* our near relatives, and we also *know* the man we met yesterday for the first time and spoke but three words to. Obviously, knowledge ranges from the maximum of understanding to mere recognition, and other languages have felt a need for more than one word to cover

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all its degrees. And so James in his urbane way stressed the distinction between what he called 'knowledge-by-acquaintance' and 'knowledge-about,' a distinction which, admittedly, is only one of degree. Now, it is a strange fact of human experience that too much knowledge-about, if it is exclusively analytical, destroys knowledge-by-acquaintance, because it destroys the thing we were acquainted with. And thus has it happened in only too many psychological novels of to-day and yesterday. Novelists have been so eager to provide knowledge *about* their characters that they have dissected them out of existence. On a mechanical theory of mind this should not be possible, since the parts have only to be assembled again, and there you are ! Yet it is not only possible, but common. And, as we know by experience, most of our reactions to real people and to people in books depend on our knowledge of them by acquaintance. And

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so they ought to, on any reasonable theory of mind. An organism—and mind is the highest form of organic development that we have experience of—is more than the sum of its parts, and each part being as it were representative of the whole, we need not indefinitely accumulate them in order to get to know it. We may know it, as we say, by intuition. Thus, in writing fiction, the novelist will no longer need to pile detail upon detail till the accumulated weight breaks down our patience. There is no advantage in enormously long books like, for instance, Mr Maurice Baring's *C. and Cat's Cradle* or Mr Brett Young's recent *Portrait of Clare*. So long as each part, be it of the book or of a character in the book, is made truly significant of the whole, a very few parts will suffice to give us the necessary knowledge-by-acquaintance, which is important, and too many will bore us without appreciably enlarging our knowledge-about, which

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in any case is much less important. Accordingly, we may guess that novels in future will tend to be shorter than they have been in the immediate past. Only writers indisputably of the first rank will be allowed to take their time, and even they, obviously, will have to prove that they cannot say what they have to say more effectively in 80,000 words than in 300,000.

Knowledge-by-acquaintance is gained most rapidly, and knowledge-about is established most securely, by contrasts and comparisons. And this fact, too, many contemporary novelists seem to have forgotten. They tend to write all the time about the same kind of people, instead of throwing one into sharp and striking contrast with another. Hence their dreariness.

But above all, the organic view of life, applied to the art of fiction, will mean a fresh insistence on the story, on plot. Not on the old, arbitrary, artificial plot, glued to the surfaces of pasteboard figures; not on plot

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as understood by the average reader or writer of detective novels. Rightly understood, plot is what the characters do to one another; that is, plot is form *par excellence* in the novel. What the characters do to one another depends on three factors: on what they are, in and for themselves; on what they are as ingredients of their environment; and on what they are by reason of the environment's ingression into them. What they are, in and for themselves, will no longer serve alone as material to make novels out of, because, taken alone, it is incomplete, abstract, and to that extent untrue. Mrs Woolf may have done well to complain that the Edwardians missed the essential Mrs Brown by looking only at the house she lived in. But it is even easier to miss the essential Mrs Brown by not looking at her house at all. Her house is an ingredient in the enduring pattern that we call Mrs Brown; and so are Mr Brown her husband,

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and Johnny Brown her son, and the milkboy who delivers her morning milk, and the lawyer who makes her will, and the undertaker who finally buries her ; and so too are the war memorial that she passes (fortunately without looking at it) every day, and the Sunday newspapers that she reads, and the ugly tombstone with which her sorrowing husband disfigures her grave. Mrs Woolf is much too good a novelist to ignore all this in practice. She is always hinting at the nearly invisible threads that bind one character to another and each to the inorganic environment : that is one reason why she is the most important of our post-war novelists. But nearly invisible threads are not enough. The pattern inherent in life, depending on the interrelations of the individual patterns that are individual human beings, must be made visible and significant by creative selection. That, first and last, is the novelist's job.

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And the point of view, if it means, as with Henry James and his followers, the point of view of a single character in the book—that, too, must be abandoned, and for the same reason as before. The pattern in only one aspect is false; the true pattern combines different aspects, different prehensions, no one of which must be sacrificed to any other.

Whichever way we turn, to this we come back in the end: the imperative need for organic pattern. The lack of it in our post-war culture, and accordingly in our post-war fiction, makes all our technical skill in matters of detail a mere whistling of jigs to a milestone. It will be manifest in the English and American fiction of to-morrow. We can be certain of that. And we can be reasonably certain, too, of the kind of agents it will need, and find—reincarnations of Scheherazade, the Teller of STORIES.





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